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ABSTRACT

Collaboration between schools and businesses in Boston is now nearly a decade old. The most significant achievement of this partnership is the Boston Compact, a formal agreement between the Superintendent of Boston public schools and the Boston business community establishing that the schools will work to achieve annual percentage increases in student retention, curriculum improvement, and testing in exchange for business's preferential hiring commitments for public school graduates. Measurable 5-year goals for the schools include annual 5 percent increases in test scores and attendance records. All graduates are expected to pass competency tests by 1986. For business, the measure consists of the number of graduates hired in full-time entry level, part-time, and summer positions. Goals for the first year were to have 200 companies sign the hiring pledge and to provide at least 1,000 summer and 400 permanent jobs. In addition, 25 local universities signed the Compact and have pledged a 5 percent increase, by 1989, in enrollment of Boston graduates and a concommitant increase in support to improve college retention. The city's many cultural institutions, museums, and social service agencies have redefined their roles as support vehicles for the Compact. Also, because the years preceding high school may be crucial in determining students' school careers, new initiatives have been made in the Boston middle schools to complement the Compact's efforts. (RH)

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THE BOSTON COMPACT - AN EVOLVING PARTNERSHIP IN EDUCATION

Remarks by

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Delivered to

The Conference Board

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I appreciate the opportunity to speak this afternoon about the Boston Compact, which we believe is a model of cooperation between business and education on behalf of Boston's youth. While this conference may be entitled "Business And The Public Schools: A New Collaboration", and for many cities, the idea of collaboration between schools and business may be new, in Boston, our growing partnership is now nearly a decade old. We think that the most significant achievement of that partnership is the Boston Compact.

The Compact is a formal agreement between the Superintendent of the Boston Public Schools and the Boston business community that the schools will work to achieve annual percentage increases in student retention and curriculum improvement and testing in exchange for preferential hiring commitments for full-time positions by Boston businesses.

Why is business involved in Boston's public schools? In the 1980's, urban schools are a place of confrontation. Half of our students enrolled who complete high school may see school as a source of opportunity. The other half, who drop out and don't complete a four year term, will look instead to the streets, to the underclass, to crime, to welfare support. The cost of this conflict is too high -- in tax dollars, in lost productivity, in our sense of community. As we enter a period of declining population, and contemplate a reduced pool of potential entry-level employees, it is to our advantage to intercede. We have found that the promise of a job is a powerful inducement to keep potential drop-outs in school.

In Boston, we have come to believe that public/private collaboration is a real opportunity for addressing the intractable problems of our cities, in the face of reduced funding.

We have learned that partnerships can run better programs. They can force accountability. They enable us to address root problems, rather than superficial symptoms. They can even spark entrepreneurial behavior. The Boston Compact, which is a partnership among the schools, corporations, universities, the Chamber of Commerce, and cultural and social service institutions, simply couldn't operate without cooperation from all parties.

The Boston Compact was not generated spontaneously, however. Its roots have grown and evolved over time. Its inception can be traced to Boston's difficult era of court-ordered desegregation nearly ten years ago. Prior to the busing controversy of the early 1970's, most of the city's schools drew their students from their neighborhoods, and their connection to business or commerce often was limited to local merchants buying space in a football program book.

Since busing, the schools have steadily lost their natural political constituency of parents. Total school enrollment has declined from 92,000 in 1970 to under 60,000 in 1982. Projections suggest an enrollment of 40,000 by 1995. This decline reflects not only the demographic facts of life, but also the option for mobility for the middle class that is represented by the parallel parochial school system.

Thirty years ago, 50% of the city's eligible voters were public school parents. By this year, that number had dropped to 21%. More than 70% of the student body is now minority, despite the city's population which is 70% white and 30% minority. The schools, as a result, have become increasingly a dumping ground for the problems of our city. At the same time, the high demands on the system have not been translated into voter support. The business community, by default, has found itself designated as the schools'principal political constituency, with an agenda of preparing increasing numbers of literate graduates.

The formation of school-business partnerships, the first step in greater school-business collaboration in Boston, was speeded along by the desegregation decision. Federal Judge Garrity embraced the Tri-Lateral Council for Quality Education, a voluntary pairing among Boston's major employers and the city's eighteen high schools which emerged at that time as an innovative kind of support vehicle. Each company adopted a school, designing its working partnership to meet the needs of its school's headmaster, faculty and students. Eighteen different models emerged, a few with great success, some with substance, and others, unfortunately, which were mere paper agreements.

Such school-business pairings had both positive and negative aspects. They regularized business involvement in the schools, and brought to the regular attention of corporate leaders the problems of the city's schools. They also illustrated the tremendous effort required for change. Relationships were often frustrating on both sides. Teachers and administrators saw business as interlopers on their turf. Business resources which were proferred tended to be pushed to the periphery. The strength of a partnership often tended to be defined by a company's willingness to respond to and pay for yearbook printing, the senior class banquet, or other frills. At a time of great crisis for the schools, business people were offered no central role in school decisions. Despite the well-meaning intentions of this effort, we began to see that there were real limits to adopt-a-school programs.

Meanwhile, in the late 1970's, a group of about a dozen leading employers, many involved in the Tri-Lateral Council, came together to collaborate on the development of an expanded and better coordinated employment and training system for the city's disadvantaged residents. Through the creation of the Boston Private Industry Council, the corporate community began working with government and neighborhood leaders to design higher quality, more responsive training programs for the unemployed.

As we explored the roots of continuing unemployment, however, we saw skill shortages were only a symptom. There was a systemic pattern to the issues before us, and this led to a greater exploration of root causes. Disadvantaged citizens, without good basic skills and vocational training, faced bleak employability prospects. The $6,000 per participant cost of individual training often had one-third of that amount devoted to remediation

in reading, writing and elementary computation. Twenty-five percent of all adults in Boston lack a hign school diploma. In some neighborhoods, often those with the highest unemployment statistics, the illiteracy figure stands at 50%.

Having gained a greater appreciation of the complex interrelationship among illiteracy, remediation and job training, the business community began to see its self-interest being served by ensuring that school-to-work transition issues formed a more important component of public education, thereby better preparing the city's future workforce for life in the business world. We began with a summer jobs effort, placing inner-city high school students who met criteria such as good attendance and passing grades, in unsubsidized, private sector jobs, often in Boston's largest companies, to which they typically would lack access. Over the four year life, to date, of this program, (which in 1983 employed nearly 1200 students, a ten-fold expansion since 1980), the business community has responded with enthusiasm.

At the same time, we recognized that we could and should insist that if we were to continue to provide jobs, that the school department should assume greater responsibility for curriculum improvement, instructional quality and retention of students in school -- especially in light of the fact that nearly half of all freshmen do not stay to complete their senior year. We recognized that the limited success of school-business pairings was due to a lack of measurement capability by the system and no system-wide goals being set by business.

Business recognized that it was the schools' responsibility to ensure that its graduates were literate, able to undertake basic computation, and were aware of the importance of reliable attendance. Business saw its greatest bargaining chip to be its hiring power, and understood that it could use this as leverage to move the schools to better address these questions of basic preparedness. It was this informal understanding of mutual roles, emanating from the programs like summer jobs, and growing dissatisfaction with the ineffectiveness, over time, of the adopt-a-school effort, which led to the creation and implementation of the Boston Compact.

The Boston Compact, simply, is a formal agreement among business, universities and the schools that essentially guarantees priority access to jobs for Boston high school graduates (as opposed to suburban graduates) if they are properly prepared. The Compact sets measurable, 5-year goals. For the schools, they are in terms of annual 5% increases in test scores and attendance records. All graduates are expected to pass competency tests by 1986. For business, the measure is in terms of graduates hired in full-time entry-level, part-time and summer positions. The goals for the first year were to have 200 companies sign the hiring pledge, and to provide at least 1,000 summer and 400 permanent jobs.

Twenty-five local universities signed the Compact, as well, and have pledged a 5% increase, by 1989, in enrollment of Boston graduates, and a concommitant increase in support for those in college to support retention. Overall, there is a commitment to a 5% annual improvement as well in job or college placement for Boston graduates. The schools have set curriculum and graduation standards and plans, jointly developed by teachers and administrators in each of the seventeen high schools. The standards govern basic skills, attendance, job preparation, college preparation and outreach to parents and community. A $1 million, 3-year computer-assisted learning and literacy plan has been developed with Digital Equipment Corporation, with hardware, software and staff training for each school.

What have been the results to date? In the first year, more than 300 employers signed the priority hiring pledge. 415 June graduates were placed in permanent jobs as part of the Compact. 1200 summer jobs in the private sector were provided. The demographics of those hired permanently reflect almost exactly the make-up of the school population. An interesting side result seems to be that fewer young people have entered the military, which may be attributable to expanded opportunities for employment resulting from the Compact.

The cost of the Compact is shared among the partners. The school department has redirected $1.5 million in education and vocational funds toward support of the Compact. $500,000 of school funds have been provided for computer assisted education. Business and foundation support over the past 3 years has totalled $1.1 million. In addition, the wage bill for this past summer jobs program totalled $1.5 million from employers. The Private Industry Council has designated several staff from its youth programs to work on Compact hiring and placement. Volunteer business representatives from the Tri-Lateral Council and the Chamber of Commerce have worked on curriculum, career education and marketing of the Compact. Having exceeded our initial goal of 200 signatures by 50%, our aim in 1984 is to take that level to 400 business signatures.

The Compact has also recognized the importance of other community components. The city's many cultural institutions and museums have come together and redefined their roles in this context as employers first and cultural resources second. All have signed the Compact. Social service agencies, not usually collaborators with the schools, are redefining their roles as support vehicles for the Compact. The presidents of all of Greater Boston's 25 major universities have also signed on as Compact employers.

The Compact has completed its first year, and seems on a path of progress. What of the future? As I have indicated in describing the evolution of the Compact partnership, there has been a progression in our growing understanding of the relationship between school and work. Our attention is now also being focused on the years preceding high school. In a recent review of the many national studies of American education, Harold Howe, former U.S. Commissioner of Education, criticizes all of the studies presented so far for failing to look closely enough at the years preceding high school. He suggests that any action agenda for the schools needs to consider grades six to eight, as well.

Recent research on success in high school indicates that students may start on a path toward either graduating or dropping out as early as sixth grade, when ill-prepared young people face the rigors of junior high school. Students from all backgrounds seem to proceed at a similar pace of learning through fifth grade. From that point, there is sharp divergence, with white students moving faster than their minority counterparts. For the schools' minority population, many of whom have other family and home problems, there is a lack of support for academic achievement.

To address this situation, we have recently launched several new initiatives in the Boston middle schools, to complement the Compact's efforts. For example, the superintendent has adjusted his budget by nearly $1 million to ensure additional reading teachers in each middle school. This allows special assistance to classroom teachers, as well as early attention for students with particular problems. There is a continuing attempt to decrease the size of reading classes, and to encourage reading as an element of many parts of the school day.

This past summer, an especially promising pilot program addressed directly the matter of reading and basic skills, using the hook of computer-aided learning to attract and retain students. A group of fifth-graders, all reading at least two years behind grade level, participated in a six-week program of reading, writing and math, using mini-computers as aids to self-paced instruction. Attendance and enthusiasm were high, and each student bettered his or her reading scores to some degree. 40% scored significantly higher at the end of the program. Although the model is expensive, since it requires low student/teacher ratios, it does seem to be an effective manner of intervention. This year, the participants' academic results are being monitored carefully. Their teachers have reported that they were far better prepared in September than had been the case in the past, and 20% are on the honor roll for the first time in their school careers.

This summer, we plan to expand the program to serve between four and six hundred students. We are working to raise corporate and foundation funding, to match the school department's commitment of buildings, transportation, and supplies. As with last year, computer-aided instruction will be the central element of program design.

Boston's recent school history is not a proud one. In the city which is home to the nation's first public school, founded in 1635, there are high drop-out rates, continuing racial tension, and minimal public confidence in the system. But the Boston Compact provides an example of the kind of results which are possible when the public and private sectors decide to work jointly to solve a difficult problem.

What have we learned from the Compact? That the problems of adult illiteracy and unemployment are the result of poor academic training seen most clearly in high school, but beginning in junior high and elementary school. That we must expand our expectation of what academic preparation is about to include specific school-to-work assistance. That measurable goals for both schools and business are the essential underpinning to hard-headed, mutually-beneficial collaborations for improvement. That we must think in time frames beyond electoral, public or private sector budgetting processes. That there is a clear and important cooperative role for business, philanthropy, cultural institutions, social services, government, parents and the schools. That growth of successful institutional interventions is organic, from roots and not blueprints.

We have seen a way to involve the business community constructively to improve the schools. However, to have any impact on public secondary education issues while simultaneously devoting attention to city-wide policy, it is necessary to devote attention to the individual schools. As a result, we now are working on two fronts: to enhance and renew our school-business pairings through the Tri-Lateral Council's efforts, and to further develop the reach of the Compact.

Our goal has been to ensure an open and quality education for all of Boston's youth. We have strived to do this in a new way, a way which streched and redefined our thinking and the resources available. This success has surprised many, both our supporters and our challengers, and has spurred us on to continue to define the dynamic of this growing partnership.